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Working

By Wayne F. Nelson

# Washington's Best Employers

*At These Six Companies, the Pay and Benefits Are Good.  
Even More Important, People Care and Are Challenged.*

Walking up the ramp to the back entrance of Giant Food's Landover headquarters one rainy day, Lisa Hall slipped and fell. She wasn't hurt, but she was upset. When she got to her desk in the accounting department, she picked up the phone and dialed the office of company chairman Israel Cohen. As usual, Izzy Cohen answered the phone himself. The next day the ramp was carpeted.

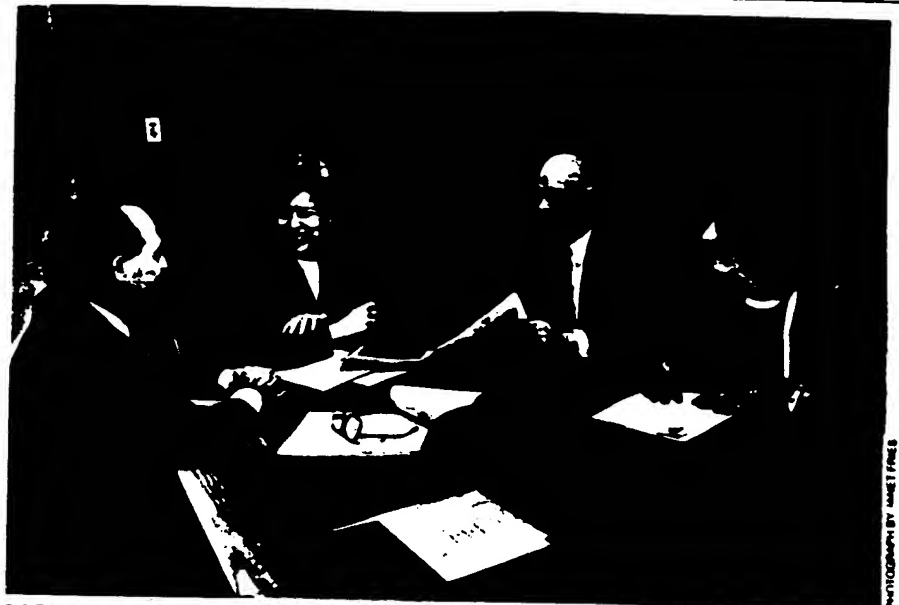
Everyone answers his or her phone at Giant Food, and no one hesitates to take problems or suggestions to the top. This "open door" between employees and management is cited more often than salary and benefits by Giant personnel in describing why the company is one of the best places to work in Washington.

Not that salary and benefits aren't important. All six of the companies we selected as the best to work for in this area pay competitive salaries and offer superior benefits. But management's responsiveness to the needs, ideas, and goals of its employees most often made the difference in job satisfaction. Not surprisingly, the companies we found with the most enthusiastic employees are among the most successful in the area.

Much the same was true of the corporations profiled in the 1984 book *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America*. Not a single Washington-based company made that list. But our research shows that some local companies are every bit as good as those selected by the book's authors.

When we began work on this article, we asked hundreds of people to recommend good employers. We concentrated on larger, locally based companies on the theory that big employers are better able to offer good benefits packages and provide more employment opportunities. This focus excluded many well-run small firms, professional offices, trade associations, and major companies such as IBM and Time Inc. (both of which made the national list) that employ many Washingtonians but are headquartered elsewhere.

We contacted 51 of the companies most highly recommended in our initial survey. Several of those then eliminated themselves. Some, such as PEPCO, did



MCI promotes job satisfaction by encouraging communication from the top down and the bottom up. Here, employees discuss an in-house publication. From left: Ken Cox, corporate news-bureau manager; Shirley Robinson, senior manager of corporate affairs; Wade Allen, furniture coordinator; senior vice president Ken Cox; and staff assistant Cindy Palmer.

not want to be involved. Others, such as USAir, wouldn't arrange employee groups for us to talk with. And still others, such as Vitro Corporation, refused to disclose employee benefits.

Among the remaining candidates, we interviewed dozens of employee groups. A few, such as the group from Dynallectron, were so unenthusiastic about their companies that we struck them from consideration. Most employees we talked to had both good and bad things to say about their places of work. Finally, we selected the six companies that seemed to have the strongest combination of employee benefits, enthusiasm, and job satisfaction.

As we talked to one employee group after another, it became clear that successful organizations share certain employee-oriented practices.

First, people like to work for companies that have strong, charismatic, even-handed leaders. Bill McGowan at MCI, Izzy Cohen at Giant, Bill Marriott at the Marriott Corporation—all the CEOs of

the best companies to work for are regarded by their employees as hard-working, caring, and fair. They have fostered organizations that care both about company performance and the people behind it. They have motivated their employees by example; their passion for quality is evident throughout their companies.

The happiest employees we talked with had a clear sense of where their organizations were going and how they fit into that plan. That means communication—from top to bottom and bottom to top. Employees need to be able to pass ideas, suggestions, and complaints to someone who can act on them—whether that person is the company president or the next supervisor up the ladder. At Giant, because everyone answers his own phone, passing an idea to the top means dialing four digits.

Employees also need to know what management is thinking. MCI's senior-management notes are available to everyone, including the company's furniture movers, and any employee can call

a telephone hotline to get a three-minute update of news that affects the corporation and the industry.

Perhaps the best idea in corporate communication is wandering managers—bosses who regularly visit company departments rather than sequester themselves in executive offices. Employees also like democratic facilities. Executive dining rooms and other perks contribute to a “we/they” feeling and detract from esprit de corps; the best places to work don’t have them. And what better way to communicate than to sit next to a senior manager in the company cafeteria?

Employees prize the freedom to move within a company from one job to another, and even from one field to another. This benefits the employer, too: If people can move within the company, they are less likely to look outside. The best companies post job openings throughout the organization, encourage promotion from within, and work at helping their employees grow. GEICO, for example, offers free college and insurance-related courses at its headquarters, and its management people are expected to move from one field to another on their way up the corporate ladder.

Such practices help eliminate fiefdoms—power bases that vie against one another for people and resources within an organization. Government agencies and academic institutions often are rife with them.

Money does not seem to be the main employee motivator. Virtually everyone we spoke with at these companies agreed that it is important to be fairly compensated—both in relation to the industry and within the company itself—but that money alone doesn’t do the trick. They want to work for employers who listen to them, who involve them in decisions, and who recognize them for a job well done. “A pay raise makes me feel good for about a week,” said one typical middle-manager. “A sincere pat on the back makes me happier longer.”

These employees were talking about a management attitude that shows up, among other places, in employee benefits. Good health, disability, and savings and retirement programs are important to Washington workers, and most large companies offer similar packages.

But the best companies differ from others in two important respects: First, they constantly look for new ways to improve their benefit packages; second, they always bend programs in favor of the employees. A Gannett employee contracted a disease that wasn’t specifically covered by the corporate health-care plan; Gannett’s response was to instruct its insurance company to call it something that was covered.

## **Working for the Company**

“I can’t think of a mystery book that is more exciting than what I do every day.”

“What we do really matters. There is nothing trivial or routine about it.”

“It’s not unusual for a junior analyst to write a report that ends up on the President’s desk.”

These are some of the comments made by Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) employees with whom we talked.

In a city where one out of every five employees calls Uncle Sam “boss,” the CIA emerged decisively as the best place to work in government. Most Agency employees don’t think of themselves as bureaucrats. Few say they would accept any other job in the government.

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And it’s no wonder. The “Company” is not just another government agency. It has a favorable pay, benefits, and retirement system and its own method of rewarding superior performance with cash. CIA employees can be promoted on the basis of ability alone, while promotions in other government agencies depend on vacancies occurring. The CIA is like private industry in another way: If you don’t perform, you can be fired.

Self-starters who relish responsibility do well in CIA jobs. Employees are expected to suggest new projects and are then given the freedom and tools to pursue them. As a result, they can be involved with state-of-the-art technology, information resources second to none, and the assistance of experts in virtually any field. There is great pride among Agency people about the caliber of their fellow employees. They boast that they could staff any university in the world. Thirty languages are taught at Langley, and the capacity exists to teach 35 others; 142 courses are offered, and employees are sent to universities for any courses that aren’t. It’s not unusual to spend the first year or so of employment taking courses to learn the job.

Because of its academic flavor, bright people are attracted to Agency jobs. Many have university research and teaching backgrounds. They come for the challenge of the work, the excitement,

and the opportunity to travel.

And they stay. Turnover is very low—which is fortunate because getting hired takes nearly forever. Besides lengthy interviews in which the lifetime-career nature of the job is stressed, there are the security checks and polygraph exams. “We go after the same high-quality people as IBM, Western Electric, and Merrill Lynch, and then we run them through a very fine filter,” says Harry Fitzwater, recently retired deputy director for administration. “The result is a very select group of people indeed.”

There is an active open-door policy, an ongoing suggestion program in which every suggestion is read by a senior manager, and opportunity to move from one career field to another. Women believe they are given as much chance to get ahead as their male counterparts.

Because the CIA headquarters are set in a campus-like environment away from the city, the facilities range from an excellent, newly renovated restaurant to jogging trails and physical-fitness facilities. The Agency is the only Washington-area employer we found that will soon offer child-care services for its employees, and it works with private companies to place employees who retire, resign, or even have been fired. One obvious reason is to keep former “Company” employees happy and financially solvent.

## **Where Everyone Is an Owner**

If you are a slougher, GEICO is the sort of company where your peers are likely to throw stuffed chickens at you. Says Donna Legro, a sales-and-service manager who has been with the company for fifteen years: “Every manager at every level is expected to write a business plan and to set goals. The manager then must present the plan to his colleagues. If they think your goals aren’t challenging enough, you are likely to hear catcalls or have a stuffed cloth chicken thrown at you.”

Legro is a quintessential GEICO employee. She began as a claims examiner and now runs a staff of 155 people. “If you like to work, you will be rewarded at GEICO,” says Joe Thomas, who joined the company right out of high school and is now the firm’s employee-benefits manager. He has earned credits toward half of his bachelor’s degree in business administration through GEICO, which encourages education and training programs.

It also encourages social responsibility. “We really care about what we can do for the community,” says Emma Beaner, a 21-year veteran of the company. The day we were at GEICO, a company “gong show” netted more than \$1,000 for the United Way. Senior man-

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agers with designated parking spaces often raffle the spaces for charity, and everyone pitches in for telethons.

GEICO is a very successful insurance company. Jonathan Hadfield, a senior program analyst, thinks one reason is that "management is very much involved with everyone's day-to-day successes. I am always amazed at just how much they know about exactly what I'm doing." Terry Mannion, a claims-report and systems supervisor, thinks it's because "everyone at GEICO is an owner." In fact, 72 percent of all employees are shareholders. "We all are concerned about what we can do to boost productivity. We are sensitive to costs, and we care about results."

Says Ellen Paterson, a research manager in the marketing department: "What I like best about GEICO is that no one is afraid to try things. We are allowed to make mistakes and learn from them." For GEICO employees, a concern is an opportunity.

### No Employees Here

There is no executive dining room at Giant's Landover headquarters. Executives eat with everyone else. But if you miss them in the lunch room, you can come in for one of the regular breakfasts with company chairman Izzy Cohen or lunches with Alvin Dobbin, senior vice president. These policies help foster high morale. As Dolores Silliday, manager of Giant's accounting department, says, "Mr. Cohen cares about every one of his associates. He welcomes suggestions and is always open to change." No one at Giant Food is called an employee: Izzy Cohen only has "associates" in his company. Somehow that doesn't come across as hokey. This is a family store with 19,000 family members.

Ask what the Giant family means to Barbara Trappt in the personnel department, and she will tell you about the checker who was tragically paralyzed from the waist down. On their own time, Giant employees worked in her home enlarging doorways and building wheelchair ramps, using money raised through a company-wide collection.

Eric Weiss offers the example of Giant drivers who chipped in \$90 each to buy Izzy Cohen a \$12,000 trailer in commemoration of Giant's 50th anniversary. Eric runs the labor-relations department, and the truckers belong to the Teamsters Union. Marjorie Cooper, an eighteen-year Giant associate, is most proud of Giant's major role in the United Way and blood-donor drives.

Opportunities for advancement are good, benefits are excellent, and morale is sky-high. Is there a difference between a Giant and Safeway checker? Mrs. Silliday says, "Next time you are

in the two stores, take a good look."

### You've Got to Believe

"There are no 4:59 leavers or 9:01 arrivals at MCI," says Bill Stern, manager of the MCI corporate news bureau. "This is a company where hard work is rewarded with fast promotions, where responsibility is passed down to the lowest levels, where people feel important because their work is important."

MCI is the sort of place that tingles with excitement—largely, employees say, because of Bill McGowan, the chief executive officer. McGowan exudes a positive and friendly attitude. He frequently walks through MCI's various locations, and his door is always open to employees. His most severe put-down, according to Ken Cox, is to tell you that "you are getting to be too much like the company you came from." Cox, a senior vice president, has been with the company since 1968, when MCI employed only 40 people. It now employs 12,656, but, says Cox, "The spirit is the same now as it was then."

Mike Rowny, a senior vice president of finance, likes that feeling. "The company is taking off," he says, "and you can see the results of your work quickly. There is no bureaucracy at MCI."

Cheryl Lera, an assistant engineer, puts it this way: "If you see something

that needs to be fixed, fix it. People here are not interested in what you have done, but what you are going to do. This is a place for positive people who have nothing against working. As a result, there is a great sense of pride."

Wade Allen is a furniture-maintenance coordinator. He used to deliver furniture to MCI and liked what he saw. "Everyone is so friendly, so busy. They seem to have a glow about them. Everyone cares." He got a job at MCI and is gobbling up more and more responsibility as his job grows to accommodate his desire to work.

MCI pays a \$500 bonus to hourly employees who refer others who are hired. Lots of friends have asked Allen about jobs at MCI, but he has referred only a select few. "I only want good people here," he says. "If you work at MCI, you've got to believe that every tree grows to the sky, that everything can be done, that if you meet a closed door, you go through the wall."

Says Melvin Forbes, senior manager of Pentagon City operations, "I heard this once and it really applies to MCI: Only those who risk going too far can know how far they can go."

More than 80 percent of MCI employees are company stockholders; 100 percent are salespeople. Lon Cunningham, commercial sales manager, explains

## What Is a Good Benefits Program?

The best companies to work for have good benefits programs, paid for mostly by the company rather than the employee. These are the benefits typically provided by the area's best large employers.

**Health care:** A good plan pays 100 percent of the first several thousand dollars of hospital expenses annually, 80 percent of the next couple of thousand dollars, and 100 percent of the balance. Major medical coverage usually pays 80 percent of outpatient doctor bills, after an annual deductible of \$100 or \$200. Dependent care is included at minimum additional cost.

**Dental care:** Coverage of most charges with a deductible of about \$100 a year. Maximum yearly benefits often exceed \$2,000. Dependents are covered.

**Life insurance:** Generous non-contributory plan, with coverage averaging three times annual earnings. Inexpensive contributory plan for additional coverage. Most plans insure the employee's spouse, too.

**Disability insurance:** Pays 65 percent of salary if employee is disabled.

**Asset-accumulation plans:** Dis-

counted stock-purchase program under which company stock can be bought at 15 to 25 percent below the market, with no brokerage fees. In some firms, the employer buys stock for employees. Pension plans are generous, too. Some firms provide profit-sharing plans or 401(K) plans, both of which enable employees to save toward retirement with savings sheltered from income tax.

**Educational reimbursement:** Full reimbursement with "B" grade or better.

**Vacation policy:** Two weeks first year, growing to six weeks after ten years.

**Employee-referral system:** Cash award for an employee referring someone who is hired, from \$500 to \$1,500 per person.

**Employee suggestion program:** Cash awards for good ideas.

**Others:** Discounted tickets to sporting and other events.

**Newest development:** Some companies are providing child-care assistance or help parents find suitable facilities that are open to fit the company work schedule.

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"Everyone understands that without sales there isn't a reason for any of the rest of MCI's employees. So when you meet an MCI person, the first thing he or she is likely to do is try to sell you the service."

### **Taking Chances**

If you ever care to really test yourself as an employer, try imitating Gannett for a year. To do that, you have to buy other companies aggressively and assimilate their employees. You need to launch a national newspaper from scratch, relocating thousands of employees from around the country. You must relocate your headquarters from Rochester, New York, to Washington, DC, and move every employee who wants to move, including those from the mail room. You

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have to instill a spirit of cooperation among traditionally competitive organizations—newspapers, radio and television stations, and a wire-service network.

Gannett has done it. But then any company that hires a female attorney who happens to be a civil-rights activist as its equal-opportunities manager is clearly not afraid to take chances. And Shirley Dilsworth is not the only high-ranking woman at Gannett, where Cathie Black is the publisher of its flagship national newspaper, *USA Today*. Gracia Martore, the assistant treasurer, and all the other women with whom we spoke swear that Gannett is one company that really does offer equal pay for equal work.

And work you will. A Gannett day, according to Karen Jurgensen, deputy managing editor of *USA Today's* Life department, runs twelve hours. Jobs are challenging, and expectations about performance are high. That's a heavy load, but a fair one, because it's borne equally by everyone, from the top down. Gannett people agree that opportunities for advancement are plentiful, that good work is rewarded with greater responsibility and promotions, and that moving among corporate divisions is easy.

Harry Goss, for example, was hired as an attorney and now is president of the

outdoor division. This freedom of movement may be responsible for the company's cohesiveness. There are no turfdoms. Jack Hurley, news director for Gannett's television division, cites example after example of cooperation among radio, television, newspaper, and wire-service people. Any employee yearning for a more attractive job in the company fills out a career-advancement form, gets it signed by his supervisor, and goes for an interview. Supervisors keep their doors open to complaints and suggestions.

Among Gannett's employee benefits is a child-adoption assistance program, under which an employee is reimbursed all court and agency fees associated with adoption. Gannett's concern for its employees was demonstrated when the MSSIC crisis froze the accounts of many Maryland savings-and-loan depositors, including Gannett employees who were having their paychecks automatically deposited. Even before anyone thought to ask, Gannett issued new paychecks to those employees.

### **The Boss Puts on an Apron**

On Christmas day, you would not have found the Marriotts at home. But you might have chanced upon them in a Marriott hotel, a Big Boy or Roy Rogers restaurant, or even on the National Airport flight line. The Marriott Corporation is a public corporation that the Marriott family insists on running as a family store, and the employees love it.

"Nothing makes me feel better," says Frank Perry, who has been with Marriott's in-flight catering division at National Airport for 23 years, "than to shake Mr. Marriott's hand on Christmas

best and ten worst hotel-guest comment forms each month. Renee Pittman, a front-desk manager at the Washington Marriott, tells of the time Bill Marriott walked by the front desk as a man was complaining because he had lost his room by arriving later than the 6 pm check-in deadline. The man recognized Marriott and appealed to him for help. "The easiest thing for Mr. Marriott to do would be to make an exception of the rules for this fellow," recalls Pittman. "He didn't. He stood by the desk clerk's decision. That meant a lot to us."

Dick Marriott oversees the Roy Rogers operation. His first task as chief executive officer, according to Bernie Rider, a Roy Rogers district manager, was to don an apron and learn how to do what every other Roy Rogers employee learns, all the way down to operating the rib slicer.

As a result of this kind of commitment, Marriott has grown into a \$4 billion corporation known for quality products, skillful marketing, and employee efficiency.

Jeff Rowoth, director of sales at the Washington Marriott, calls working for Marriott a little like being in the entertainment business. "Every day the traveling public is your audience. And every performance counts. People who like people do very well at Marriott." [

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day. I know when he spends Christmas visiting employees that he really cares."

Senior management, including chairman Bill Marriott, eat in the company cafeteria along with everyone else. A sense of fairness and team spirit prevails. This is nothing new. The company's founder, the late J. Willard Marriott Sr., would sometimes stop by a hotel's housekeeping department, sit on the counter top, and help employees wrap drinking glasses for the guest rooms.

Bill Marriott personally reads the ten